

Gherghina, S. and Soare, S. (2019) Electoral performance beyond leaders? The organization of populist parties in postcommunist Europe. *Party Politics*, 27(1), pp. 58-68. (doi:[10.1177/1354068819863629](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819863629))

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/191842/>

Deposited on: 05 August 2019

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of
Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Electoral Performance beyond Leaders?

The Organization of Populist Parties in Post-Communist Europe

Sergiu Gherghina (University of Glasgow) and Sorina Soare (University of Florence)

Abstract

In spite of extensive research dedicated to the rise and development of fringe populist political parties in Eastern Europe, little attention has been paid to the organizational determinants of their electoral performance. This article aims to fill this void in the literature and analyzes the extent to which particular types of leadership and party organization could influence the electoral performance of three political parties from Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova and Romania. The qualitative analysis is conducted for the period 2012-2015 and uses a combination of primary (party statutes) and secondary sources (party histories, electoral databases, and literature). The results indicate how the existence of underdeveloped party organizations has a negative influence on the electoral performance, while strong and charismatic leaders are an insufficient condition for ensuring survival on the political arena.

Keywords: party organization, leadership, fringe parties, electoral performance, post-communism

Introduction

The emergence and development of fringe populist parties have been analyzed from several perspectives. At the macro-level, the literature has focused on populism as a response to the wider process of democratization. Populist actors, here, are the result of the challenges presented by the transition to democracy either as vehicles of social, economic and cultural nostalgia for the past or as hybrid forms of neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism. At the meso-level, the personalization of politics has been directly connected with a post-enlargement wave of populism linked to political leaders and the promotion of political discourses that tended to sidestep traditional ideological lines. In parallel, anti-establishment discourse, severe criticism of the incumbent elite and an emphasis on tough measures against corruption all increased the appeal of political outsiders and led to their relocation from the fringes of politics (see the introduction to this special issue). At the micro-level, research describes how voters are mobilized as a result of the match between their anti-system attitudes and the discourses of populist actors.

Although informative and very useful, these approaches rarely look beyond the party leaders (and their rhetoric) when referring to the electoral appeal of the fringe populist parties. The leaders continue to lie at the core of contemporary political parties (Cross & Pilet 2016), but another crucial component – party organization – has been largely ignored. Previous studies have looked at the

features of populist leaders with emphasis on their ability to genuinely represent the demos/ethnos, to provide simple (i.e. with immediate effects) policy solutions and to mobilize voters (van der Brug & Mughan 2007; Bos et al. 2013; Kriesi 2014). Little attention has been paid to the potential effect of party organization on the electoral performance of populist parties. This paper aims to fill this void in the literature and analyzes the extent to which particular types of leadership and party organization could influence the electoral performance of three populist political parties from Bulgaria (Bulgaria without Censorship, BBT), the Republic of Moldova (Party of Socialists from the Republic of Moldova, PSRM) and Romania (People's Party Dan Diaconescu, PPDD). These three political parties were selected because they belong to the same type of party, i.e. they emerged at the fringes with an anti-elite and anti-corruption (a common problem in the three countries) rhetoric, but differ greatly with respect to their electoral performance.

The qualitative analysis is conducted for the period 2012-2015 and uses a combination of primary (party statutes) and secondary sources (party histories, electoral databases, and literature). We look at two variables – party leader and organization – and our central argument is that strong leadership allows these parties to gain visibility and achieve good electoral results, but solid party organization helps parties maintain a certain level of popularity and may enhance their continuity in the parliamentary arena. The comparison between these three parties reveals important nuances in the leadership and organization of populist parties and provides useful insights about the mechanisms through which electoral performance has been achieved. The results indicate how the existence of light and underdeveloped party organizations has a negative influence on electoral performance. Strong and charismatic leaders are insufficient to ensure continuity in the parliamentary or even the political arena. This study is relevant for at least two reasons. First, it reveals the importance of two distinct determinants (leaders and organization) that are often taken together in the literature. Second, it shows that populist parties can influence their electoral survival by setting up a strong and stable organization. The personalization and centralization of power in the form of a one-man show is not a good recipe for sustainable electoral performance.

The following section reviews the existing literature and provides a working definition of populism. It also includes a theoretical discussion about the role of party leader and organization in mobilizing voters. The third section presents the features of the three populist parties analyzed in the paper. Following this, we assess the two dimensions of analysis for each of the parties. The conclusions summarize the main findings and discuss the major implications of this research for the study of populism.

Populist Parties and their Ties with the Electorate

When dealing with populism, the first challenge is its definition, since “the term has been used to describe political movements, parties, ideologies, and leaders across geographical, historical, and ideological contexts” (Gidron & Bonikowski 2013, p.3). The definition of a specific interpretative framework of populism is crucial for comparative analyses because it allows to avoid random decisions about what counts as a populist party. In the attempt to define populism, several conceptual approaches have been debated and fine-tuned, among which are populism as a style, as a strategy, as a discourse or as an ideology (Taggart 2000; Weyland 2001; Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008; Moffitt & Tormey 2014). These scholars point to different features of populism in which various kinds of extremisms, criticisms and anti-isms in general cohabitate. Unsurprisingly, the literature has remained doubtful about the analytical capacity of such a versatile concept applied to an ideological mixture, as it is associated with both radical right parties and movements (Ignazi 2003; Mudde 2007) and left-wing extremisms (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013).

Beyond the varying empirical applications and nuances, over the last two decades, one of the most consolidated lines of analysis has depicted populism as a ‘thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the People” (Mudde 2004, p.543). In line with Freedman’s clarifications (1996), a thin-centered ideology tends to be “limited in ideational ambitions and scope” considering that its conceptual arrangements fail to provide its specific solutions to the major questions of social-justice, distribution and conflict management. Accordingly, populism pervades traditional ideological frontiers and blends with both left or right-wing features, the direction of the graft and its intensity depending upon the socio-political context within which the populist parties mobilize (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). On these grounds, references to the pure people, the corrupt elite and the general will are considered the necessary and sufficient conditions for classifying a phenomenon as populist (Kaltwasser 2014, p.479). A core of scholars (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008b; Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011; Kaltwasser 2014) agree that populism can be best defined as a “thin-centered ideology” as “it expresses a distinct and internally coherent map of the political, but thin in its focus on broad normative principles and ontological matters rather than the detail of the policy” (Stanley 2008, p.102).

As a result of these conceptualizations this paper considers populism as a heterogeneous group of ideas filtered by the antagonism between the pure and genuine people and the rapacious and corrupt elites, and the primacy of popular sovereignty. This definition covers both left- and right-wing forms of populism and separates the populist parties from the mainstream actors. Now that we have defined what populism is, we now turn to the ways in which it may adapt to the repertoires of mass mobilization in representative democracy. Given this, the following sub-section focuses on the interplay between the ideational frame of reference and the organization of the party competing under populist slogans.

Two Pathways to Voter Mobilization

Poguntke (2002) identifies two ways in which political parties communicate with their voters in order to mobilize them. On the one hand, party leaders play a crucial role since they initiate a direct communication with the electorate through the media and the Internet. Party leaders are aware of individual citizens' preferences and promise responsiveness in exchange for their votes. On the other hand, the communication is mediated by party organizations that seek to aggregate the multitude of individual wishes into coherent demands that can be sent to the party elites. Parties can benefit greatly from organizational communication since tighter connections with the electorate are possible through the party structures on the ground (Gherghina 2014).

The direct and organizational styles of communication with the electorate have some differences but are also complementary in ensuring mobilization. The differences lie in the complexity, coverage, and length of the processes. Direct communication is relatively simple and reaches a large audience in a short period of time, while organizational communication requires more resources and time but has potentially deeper and wider coverage. The complementarity is reflected in the use of direct communication by organizational communication. For example, it is not just party leaders who use TV outlets or websites, but members of the party organization do the same; quite often the functioning of a party website or TV station depends on the voluntary work of members. Direct communication is almost a constant within the party system in the sense that many party leaders of other parties use it. However, organizational communication differs greatly, relative to the different development of party organizations and this can make a difference to the electoral fate of parties. The following lines explain how the populist parties (may) use these two pathways to mobilize voters.

To begin with the role of the leader, populism is “particularly liable to the politics of personality” (Taggart 2000, p.101). Within the supply side analysis of populism, organizational features have been treated as an alternative (independent) criterion for defining populism (Weyland 2001; Johansson 2014). Based on the populist thin-centered ideology that divides society between the people and the elites, populist leaders tend to behave like *tribuni plebis*, claiming a legitimate right to intervene in unfair acts for the people, against the “established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society” (Canovan 1999, p.3). Considering that populists’ ideational frame claims that genuine democracy (in an etymological sense mainly) is at stake, salvation is granted by the intervention of the leader (Soare 2014). Hence, the leader’s features become essential: they “‘incarnate’ the people’s culture, articulate the will of the people, ‘say what people are thinking,’ can see through the machinations of the elites and have the vision to provide simple, understandable solutions to the problems portrayed by the élites as complex and intractable” (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008a, p.7). In a sense, one could say that a populist leader preaches, constantly saying *I’m (like) you!* (Soare 2014). Incisive and personalistic types of leadership are the essential ingredients in increasing popular levels of support for populist parties.

With respect to the role of party organization, previous research has shown how it can complement leaders’ communication with the electorate in providing incentives to the voters to stabilize their preferences (Tavits 2013; Gherghina 2014). The party organization acts as an effective communication channel through which the party’s messages reach and mobilize voters. The strength of organization has been found to be the basis of the establishment of political parties in Eastern Europe (Tavits 2013). Earlier studies also found evidence that strongly organized populist actors have been more successful (Lubbers et al. 2002; Pauwels 2014). In relation to the intimate connection between the electoral attractiveness of populist parties and their leaders, Betz (2002) and Ignazi (2003) analyzed the consequences of leader-centered organization. When building hyper-centralized and vertical organizations, populist leaders tend to exercise a Bonapartist control over their parties. In these cases, leadership strength is regularly interpreted as a guarantee of internal solidity and as a synonym for programmatic flexibility. By fully controlling their parties, populist leaders can simultaneously maintain ideological cohesion and limit the damaging effect of potential fractionalization. Successful populist leaders are hence able to impose their will over the three faces of the party organization (for details, see Katz & Mair 1993); in the name of the party unity, populist leaders tend to neutralize deviant voices by isolating them.

In a detailed comparative research of 40 parties, Carter (2005, p.97) focuses on the causal links between organization, leadership and party electoral success. The analysis accounts for three organizational criteria (the degree of centralization, the strength of the leadership and the level of factionalism) and identifies two main categories of parties: 1) weakly organized and poorly led parties and 2) strongly organized and well-led parties. In reaction to the electoral results, her findings show that strongly organized and well-led parties tend to better perform than the poorly-organized/led parties. From a slightly different perspective, Norris (2005) focuses on the effects of party organization on electoral trajectories, attributing the electoral deadlocks faced by parties such as the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands to their fragile organizations. Hence Norris joins Carter in concluding that, beyond the momentum of their electoral breakthrough, populist parties rely both on charismatic leadership and effective organization in order to maintain or broaden their electoral visibility. Mudde (2007, p.270) emphasizes the paramount importance of the organization in the persistence of populist parties; minimal organization can be valorized during the electoral breakthrough, but the ability of populist parties to build more structured organizations appears to be a major asset for explaining their electoral survival.

In brief, there are theoretical reasons to believe that party organization is, next to leadership, a potential determinant of electoral performance. The following section compares and contrasts how this has worked for the three parties investigated.

The Populist Profile and Electoral Performance

Post-communist populist actors base their rhetoric on the need to simultaneously re-unify the people and enact the genuine popular will. Voices in favor of increased participation and direct democracy multiplied in tandem with the widespread hostility towards intermediaries between the people and institutions (e.g. political parties) and the emphasis on the positive role of political mobilization by Messianic leaders who entered politics in an attempt to save democracy from the maneuvers, clientelism and corruption of elites (Pirro 2015). The three political parties investigated belong to this type of and share these features. The BBT, formed on the eve of the 2014 elections for the European Parliament (EP), has its origins in the 2013 wave of protests triggered by increased poverty and corruption under the form of a civic movement (Website BBT 2015). Its discourses focus on Bulgaria's main problems: poverty and corruption. It promotes the fight against corruption within a broader protest against the establishment and the oligarchs. The BBT's identity builds around the struggle against elites, who are portrayed as conspirators who misuse public money and disregard

the people's basic needs. The party's discourse uses simple and popular stories, conspiracy theories and non-conformist behaviors.

The PSRM, founded in 1997, employed a consistent rhetoric, emphasizing the need to defend the "losers" of the democratization process and to reinforce the allegiance to the traditional networks of alliance (*in primis* the Russian Federation). The party avoids standard radical left/anti-capitalist positions while promoting strong mobilization against the corrupt political elites. The party's message is not completely anti-establishment, given that it regularly refers to the expertise of the management of the 2001-2009 period of economic and social growth Moldova knew under the Communist government. The PSRM cherishes popular sovereignty as the only legitimate source of political power and criticizes a wide range of internal and external pathologies that hamper its fulfillment (e.g. Romanian interests, EU institutions, NATO etc.). On these grounds, the people are portrayed as victims of the EU technocracy and of the Western moral values that clash with traditional Orthodoxy.

The PPDD was founded in 2011 and had a strong anti-establishment discourse. In its 2012 manifesto the party favors lower taxes for the population but calls for greater state involvement (i.e. in terms of state owned enterprises and market regulation) and expenditure. Corruption and clientelism are among the favorite themes of the party (Gherghina & Miscoiu 2014). Overall, the PPDD displays a clear tendency to present itself as a representative of all Romanians, trying to return the country to its citizens. Another strategy is to cultivate a nationalist feeling by introducing a law that allows punishment for all those who speak against the country. Another point of the manifesto refers to the (re)unification with the Republic of Moldova, an older dream of Romanian nationalists.

The Electoral Fortunes

The electoral trajectories of the three parties contrast sharply. The BBT made its debut on the political scene in the 2014 EP elections as part of a short-lived electoral alliance with the radical nationalist IMRO-Bulgarian National Movement, the Agrarian People's Union and Gergiovdan Movement. The alliance obtained 10.66% of the votes and two seats, one for the BBT leader. In view of the early elections for the national parliament scheduled for October 2014, the BBT signed a partnership agreement with Lider (since March 2015 - Bulgarian Democratic Centre). The new coalition gained 15 seats in the Bulgarian Assembly and ended up sixth – it came in fourth place in the EP elections (Table 1). The party leader Nikolay Barekov was on the party's list for both elections as a strategy to attract voters, and he eventually decided to take up his MEP mandate. Between the

2014 legislative elections and March 2015, the BBT lost almost all its Members of Parliament (MPs) and its parliamentary group disintegrated. The party was renamed Movement Recharge Bulgaria; after obstacles raised by the Central Election Commission, it decided not to run in the 2017 snap elections.

The PSRM took part in the national parliamentary elections between 1998 and 2005 on a regular basis, running alone only in the 1998 elections. In spite of changing coalitions, the party failed to obtain good electoral results and did not gain any parliamentary seats (Table 1). In the 2009 elections it did not compete and in the 2010 elections it was included on the electoral lists of the Communist Party. Only in the 2014 parliamentary elections did the party obtain parliamentary representation when it finished first.¹

Table 1: The Electoral Performance of the Investigated Populist Parties

Party	Year of formation	Elections	% of votes	No. of seats	Rank	Coalition
BBT	2014	EP 2014	10.66	1 / 17	4	Yes
		National 2014	5.69	15 / 240	6	Yes
PSRM	1997	National 1998	0.59	0 / 101	12	No
		National 2001	0.46	0 / 101	15	Yes
		National 2005	4.97	0 / 101	4	Yes
		National 2014	20.51	25 / 101	1	No
PPDD	2011	National 2012	13.99	47 / 412	3	No
		EP 2014	3.67	0 / 32	7	No

Note: Election results for the PPDD are reported for the lower Chamber of Parliament.

Having emerged in a party system that is quite unfriendly to new competitors, the PPDD had a very good electoral performance in the 2012 legislative elections, in which it placed third with almost 14% of the votes (Table 1). Following that success, many MPs left the party and joined other groups, leading to a weakening of the party. In 2013, the party leader's (Dan Diaconescu) TV station was closed down by a decision of the National Audiovisual Council of Romania, depriving the PPDD of its main propaganda tool. As a result of these two processes, the party's electoral performance in the 2014 EP elections was very poor (less than 4% of the votes and no MEP) and in 2015 the party disappeared, being absorbed by the National Union for the Progress of Romania. Let us now turn to the first analytical dimension of this paper. The following section discusses the importance of the leader for each populist party with emphasis on his origin, strategies, power and practices within the party.

¹ A partial explanation for the PSRM's success is connected with the Election Commission's decision to ban the Patria Party from the polls because it had been accused of receiving financial support from abroad (Radio Free Europe 2014); this highly contested decision is likely to have led some of the Patria's Party supporters to vote for the PSRM on the basis of their shared opposition to the EU integration.

Party Leaders as Driving Forces

The BBT and the PPDD can be considered classic cases where the parties are the product of their leaders rather than the other way around. To begin with the BBT, the party founder emerged from outside the political establishment, which allowed Barekov to position himself as an external critic of the system. Barekov's political involvement came after a long career dating back in the 1990s as a radio and a TV presenter; he had become executive director of the TV7 television channel. On the eve of the May 2013 elections, Barekov produced the story about prosecutors seizing over 300,000 extra ballots from a printer owned by a member from the former government party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB). Although initially known for his endorsement of the GERB leader and former Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, Barekov became highly critical of the overlapping relations between politics, business, and organized crime in Bulgaria. On the eve of the 2013 elections, despite protestations that the ballots were set aside for production defects (Freedom House 2014), Barekov openly accused GERB establishment of masterminding an attempt to commit electoral fraud.

Well before the official launch of his party, Barekov publicized his political views and goals. He promoted simple and comprehensive solutions designed to drag Bulgaria out of the economic crisis. His discourses were less focused on how to tackle social and economic issues technically and focused instead on immediate (economic) "salvation" and "redemption". As an anti-establishment challenge against discredited parties and elites, in November 2013 Barekov threatened to stage a human body blockade of the presidential office in Sofia in order to prevent former Prime Minister Borisov and former Interior Minister Tsvetanov from entering the building of the Presidential Administration; on the same occasion, he declared he would boo the leading representatives of the Socialists and liberals in order to let them "hear the truth about themselves" (Novinite 2013). This non-conventional method of voicing discontent together with an anti-establishment rhetoric allowed Barekov to present himself as opposing the entire political spectrum, with no regard to differences between governing élites and opposition. His strategy of communication was based on voicing the will of the common people, on voicing people's thoughts with common words and in providing simple solutions. The content of his discourse was voluntarily and pragmatically downgraded in favor of visibility and direct appeal. Part of his credibility was a by-effect of his previous career, which allowed him to claim that he saw through the machinations of the elites. The emphasis on the genuine Bulgarian people as opposed to the alienated elite gave him ample space

for an anti-establishment discourse although he regularly paid attention not to appear too politically extreme.

At the first congress of the party, in 2014, Barekov was elected by 5,000 delegates as president of the BBT. As the party statute shows, the leader has a major role in coordinating the party's activities and positions. His role is particularly important in controlling the allegiances of the appointed vice-presidents and members of the executive committee. His hegemonic position in the party is illustrated by the fact that those within the party who disagreed with him were labeled as traitors. This was visible in the case of the BBT vice-president Angel Slavchev (2014) and after the defection of almost all the party's MPs (2015). For example, faced with Slavchev's allegation of being "a mere puppet... directed every day by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms' MP Delyan Deevski", Barekov counterattacked, portraying Slavchev's position as "manipulative". Slavchev was accused of "trying to build parallel party structures" and of "deciding to leave the party after failing to gather support for his actions" (Novinite 2014b). In formal terms, Slavchev's dismissal was justified by both acts undermining the prestige and reputation of the party (art. 38 of the Party Statute) and injurious behavior that damaged the reputation and interests of the party (Art. 11 of the Party Statute). In practice, Barekov made extensive use of the statutory powers and increased his level of domination within the party central office.

Table 2: A Comparative Overview of the Party Leaders' Features

Features	Nikolay Barekov (BBT)	Igor Dodon (PSRM)	Dan Diaconescu (PPDD)
Origin	Outside politics Radio and TV presenter	Experienced politician High expertise	Outside politics Journalist
Strategy	Voicing the will of ordinary people Simple solutions	Key problems from a socialist perspective Chameleonic strategy	Representing ordinary people Simple solutions
Power	Hegemonic position Centralized decision- making	External power Intra-party medium centralization	Hegemonic position Centralized decision- making
Practices	Personal party Removing opponents	Main image of the party Investing in organization	Personal party Appointing loyal people

The PPDD leader, Dan Diaconescu, largely matches this profile. Diaconescu established a personal party that combined improvisation and opportunism. He played the central role in a) establishing the party structures and mobilizing electoral support and b) conveying the programmatic discourse. The party organization was built by transforming parts of his audience into followers and party members (Chiruta and Rachitam, 2012). This was a pragmatic approach since the legal provisions required a party to have 25,000 members to formally register. However, this audience-centered

structure was sufficient only for the initial phase of party formation. When faced with the task of fielding candidates for the national legislative elections, Diaconescu started to import politicians from other parties who had limited opportunities for re-nomination; they in turn brought financial and symbolic benefits to the PPDD. With respect to the programmatic discourse, Diaconescu followed the crude and simplistic style of his TV shows. This was a mixture of anti-corruption slogans and nationalistic values that coexisted with people-friendly economic measures. The ideas that nurtured the programmatic identity were derived from the leader's own experiences with what he called, in general, the abuses of the system and in particular of the judicial system. His experiences were transformed into powerful symbols of the fight against the system, the elites, and the establishment.

In conveying these messages, the role of his visual media outlet played an essential role. The party was advertised even before its official formation. The fines imposed by state authorities for illegally conducting its electoral campaign were interpreted as proof that by a corrupted and inefficient system was inventing obstacles to obstruct the honest people and their future representatives. According to this view, the leader, the party and the audience were victims that were able to gather their discontent in a common voice. Diaconescu became not only the main face of the party and the source of its identity, but also its tutor. The party could not exist without the leader's material and symbolic involvement. The emphasis on the 'Savior' character of the leader reinforced his legitimacy as being "beyond the party", a status granted directly by the people. While the spontaneous and dilettante characteristics of the party were publically defended as proof of the "non-contamination" from the establishment, on the eve of the 2012 elections the extent of the leader's full control over the internal decision-making process was illustrated by the pragmatic compromises over candidate selection and campaign funding.

All this indicates Diaconescu's hegemonic behavior in an over-personalized party that relied on his TV station and personal network. The entire electoral campaign was meant to fit the visual formats of the TV station-centered campaign and the content of leader's speeches for more than a decade. The PPDD was deprived *ex ante* of its capacity to provide a counterpoint to the personal interpretation provided by the leader; it could not challenge his complete control over the three faces of the party (party in public office, in central office and on the ground). Consequently, the party was created at the service of the leader: the personal and business dimensions overlapped, and the party became fully dependent on the leader's inputs. These practices were formally backed by provisions that ensured the control of the leader over a great deal of party activity, with a very

high level of centralization. For example, the president decided the party manifesto and political strategy (Art. 60, PPDD Statute), approved all candidates for public office (including a veto right), validated all internal elections, applied sanctions, and led all the meetings of the party in its central office (Art. 69, PPDD Statute).

A Different Profile

The failure to gain parliamentary seats placed the PSRM in a marginal position for more than a decade after its foundation. Its spectacular success in 2014 was also the result of new leadership. Igor Dodon had held various positions within the public administration and had high-level political experience. As a member of the Communist Party, he had occupied ministerial positions, first as a Vice-Minister of Trade and Economics (2005), then as Minister of Trade and Economics (2006-2009) and Deputy Prime Minister (2008-2009). A couple of months before his defection from the Communists' ranks, he had been narrowly defeated in the election to be mayor of the capital city. He resigned from the Communist Party due to the constitutional crisis following the resignation of President Voronin in 2009.² He joined the PSRM and was unanimously elected as president by the 700 delegates at the 10th Congress of the party organized one month later in December 2011 (e-democracy.md 2011). He stepped down in 2016 only after being elected as the country's president. Unlike the BBT and PPDD leaders, Dodon had a political background and promoted a peculiar anti-establishment discourse oriented against corruption, criminality and the foreign elites that endorse homosexuality. He praised instead the glorious years of the 2001-2005 communist management. Dodon's legitimacy was justified both in relation to the credibility of his political and technical expertise, and to the proximity to the people and the shared vision of society (e.g. moral values, how politics should function).

From the very beginning, Dodon's strategy was a mixture of messages focused on people and chameleonic adaptation. In line with the communist perspective, he engaged in a discourse of higher wages and employment rates, amendments of the education system and higher social allowances. He also dedicated particular attention to the Transnistrian conflict and the need to restore peaceful relations with ethnic minorities in Moldova. He also advocated the need for a technocratic government with the aim of limiting the political negative influence on the government's work. Three years later the PSRM's position radically changed, in line with the

² Dodon has been followed by other communist MPs that temporarily formed a parliamentary group: Igor Dodon, Vadim Mişin, Zinaida Greceanîi, Ion Ceban, Veronica Abramciuc, Tatiana Botnariuc and Oleg Babenco.

leadership's chameleonic abilities. The malleable party platform appears to be a direct continuation of the leader's ability to renew himself and adapt to the people's requirements. Hence, within a couple of years, the key characteristic of Dodon's leadership can be connected with the strategic capacity to deter from previous engagement (e.g. technical government) and attract wider groups of voters (e.g. the Russophile traditional Communist electorate).

The centralized management of the party became a model for the Moldovan state. Dodon has often emphasized the issues of stateness and responsibility, with emphasis on Orthodoxy, law and order. He often speaks about neutrality, territorial integrity and interethnic cooperation in Moldova. This interpretation follows the traditional inter-ethnic model of governance endorsed since the Soviet rule. In this sense, the party's new leadership understood the need to distance itself from the concept of a dominant ethnicity (Romanian speaking community), invest in interethnic tolerance and the preservation of a Moldovan identity distinct from the Romanian one. Dodon's "winning formula" is a combination of provocative style and increasing media coverage. He poses as a young and promising option for the leftist pro-Russian electorate, enjoying the explicit endorsement of Moscow and the Russian state media. His features as the public face of the party are complemented by active involvement in the internal life of the PSRM. Since 2011, Dodon increased party membership and increased the number of Congress delegates from 700 to 2,000. Unlike the leaders of the two parties discussed before, he showed concern for party development beyond elections. At the same time, he avoided the over-centralization of power, an element that could be due to the fact that the party existed before his election as president. The party statute has formal provisions according to which the leader is the main figure of the party in its relationship with voters and competition with other parties (Art. 4.26, PSRM Statute). At the same time, he leads the activity of the national executive in its role in deciding upon candidates; however, this role does not belong only to the leader as was the case with the BBT and the PPDD, and the leader is unable to impose sanctions or control other party activities on his own. Thus, Dodon's power is quite limited with respect to intra-party decision-making, where an important role is played by the territorial organizations, e.g. in nominating candidates.

The analysis in this section revealed the high importance of the party leader for each of the three populist parties, especially in conveying messages and mobilizing voters around elections. Relevant differences can be seen between the BBT and the PPDD, on the one hand, which appear to be structural extensions of their leaders, and the PSRM, on the other hand, which added a reformist and charismatic leader to an existing structure. The following section looks at this

structure and seeks to assess the development of the party organizations with a focus on the formation of the organization, the size of its membership, its territorial coverage and its ability to produce propaganda.

Developing Party Organizations?

The BBT and the PPDD were formed shortly before elections and thus their immediate concern was the creation of a party organization. Their approach was fairly similar and used top-down mechanisms for which the personal connections of the leaders were vital. The BBT started building its organization by attracting several defecting MPs from the ranks of mainstream parties such as the Bulgarian Socialist Party, GERB and Ataka. In this sense, even before the 2014 national legislative elections, the BBT controlled three deputies in parliament. This approach helped the party to develop swiftly and quickly reach a good territorial coverage. According to data provided by the BBT website, the party had 27 regional offices plus one in the capital city. Thus, it covered all the major territorial administrative divisions of the country, seeking to ensure support throughout the entire country. At a sub-regional level there were local organizations (named clubs) that gathered together one or more communal or municipal organizations. No reliable data could be found about the number of these organizations but some media reports referred to the establishment of such organizations consisting of a few tens of members. No data could be found about membership.³ Isolated reports in the media provide some numbers that indicate extremely low membership for the party: 50 in the city of Stara Zagora, 150 in the city of Kazanlak and 1,500 in the Varna county. There is no centralized evidence of party members and the party did not answer any of our inquiries regarding the size of its membership.

From a functional perspective, the party has a hierarchical structure with the National Congress at the top. The Congress is composed of elected delegates; according to its statutory rules, the Congress is in charge of deciding on programmatic documents, the election and dismissal of the party's President, the selection of the members of the National Council of Regions and decisions regarding potential mergers. The executive committee is the operational branch in charge of decisions on current political issues, organizing party activities and the procedures for nominating candidates in elections. The Party President chairs and convenes the meetings of the National

³ According to the party law, in order to be registered parties are required to present a list of no less than 500 members. Barekov was elected by 5,000 delegates at the first Congress of the party and it is quite likely that they were also members. When registering the coalition with Lider for the October 2014 elections a list of 7,777 signatures was presented. According to the electoral law, in order to take part in the elections, parties had to provide a list of 7,000 supporting signatures.

Council and the Executive Committee. He coordinates the implementation of the decisions of the governing bodies of the party and has a major role in formulating the party's official positions on issues arising between the party's statutory meetings. Additional statutory powers concern the Party President's role in the appointment of the Vice-Presidents and the members of the executive committee.

It is difficult to collect information about the BBT's party organization due to their inactive website. The only place where some basic information regarding events can be found is a Facebook group. The reason for including the channels for propaganda in the criteria for analysis is that they reflect the attention paid to the continuous development of the organization and they provide important means with which to communicate with voters (Werkmann & Gherghina 2018). The BBT does not appear to place much emphasis on the role of organization.

The PPDD mirrors the approach of the BBT to a great extent. The party developed its organization quite swiftly in a top-down manner. Less than half a year after its formation the PPDD had territorial organizations in almost all Romanian counties (i.e. territorial administrative divisions of the country) and in a large number of cities and towns. While the territorial organizations broadly covered the country, the actual number of members remains problematic. According to the PPDD's official statement, membership reached 1,000,000 a few days after the January 2012 congress. This sharply contrasts with the figures presented in the official registry of political parties, where the membership organization of the PPDD is given as 31,929. The statements of the territorial branches support the official figures more than the numbers declared by the party. For example, two months before the January 2012 congress, the PPDD organization in the Gorj county – the constituency where Diaconescu ran against the prime-minister in the legislative elections – declared that it had 3,000 members (PPDD website, 2013). This is illustrative since Gorj was one of the constituencies that supported the PPDD the most.

The development of the PPDD's organization was long perceived by the party leader as its main liability. Diaconescu has often complained about how expensive a territorial organization is and has emphasized that the other parties can afford to pay for professional consultancy. The official discourse praised dilettantism, spontaneity and improvisation as cheap solutions adopted by the party of the common people. Although the symmetry between the leader and the common people is the official element of the rhetoric, hierarchy had its relevance too. The layers and decision-making arrangements within the PPDD largely corresponded to those presented in the BBT (Table 3). Another similarity lies in the approach taken towards the means of party propaganda: although

it was once very useful for promoting the ideas of the party, the TV station was closed by state authorities and the website became inactive. Just before its disappearance from the political scene, the PPDD had an active Facebook group for a few months, which also soon became inactive. In brief, the disappearance of its means to communicate with voters and potential members matched the gradual loss of its territorial branches, e.g. through defections to other parties.

Table 3: A Comparative Overview of the Party Organizations

Features	BBT	PSRM	PPDD
Formation	Top-down Hierarchical	Partially top-down Stratarchical	Top-down Hierarchical
Membership	Unknown	9,100 (0.32% in the electorate)	31,929 (0.18% in the electorate)
Territorial coverage	Very good Unstable	Very good Developing	Very good Unstable
Propaganda	Inactive website Functional Facebook	Updated Website Updated Facebook	Inactive website Inactive TV station Inactive Facebook

Note: The data on voting age population to calculate the ration of party members in the electorate come from IDEA.

Although electorally irrelevant for more than a decade after its foundation, the PSRM maintained a territorially widespread organization with a number of local strongholds (in particular cities like Bălți and Comrat). It is relevant to note that the organization is constantly expanding: in 2011, the PSRM reported 8,000 members registered within 29 territorial organizations. In 2014, the same source spoke of more than 11,000 party members registered in 38 territorial organizations (Website PSRM). The number reported in Table 3 comes from the Central Electoral Commission, which asked the parties to declare their revenues: the PSRM claimed in April 2016 that it has 9,100 members who pay fees. At the same time, between the 2011 Congress until the 2014 Extraordinary Congress the number of delegates almost tripled (from 700 to 2,000). The recruitment of members is carefully managed and conditioned by (1) the knowledge of the status and party programmatic documents, (2) an official conversation with the secretary of the local unit of reference and (3) the completion of a set of documents (application form, declare about political affiliation, copy of ID card, photos). All these indicate a rigorous approach towards party membership that has been enhanced from above since at least 2011.

According to its 2013 statute, the PSRM maintained a relatively stratarchical organization in which the leading bodies of the Party are the local organizations, the national committee and the Congress. A criterion of participation is included: their decisions are considered deliberative, if the meetings are attended by more than half of the total number of party members or delegates. The

party maintains a functional and updated website that includes documents, videos, and news about the party. A map with the addresses of all territorial organizations is available. Also, an updated Facebook page is available for members and sympathizers, which summarizes the most recent events and statements of the party leader.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper analyzed the extent to which particular types of leadership and party organization influenced the electoral performance of three populist political parties in Bulgaria, Moldova and Romania. Our qualitative analysis revealed that all three political parties required a strong charismatic leader to pave their way to parliamentary representation. At the same time, a certain degree of leadership autonomy and the ability to take decisions was required in order to boost the electoral support of these parties, irrespective of their newly emerged character (BBT and PPDD) or time spent at the periphery of the political space (PSRM). In all three cases, the populist leaders legitimated their position through shared repertoires of criticisms against the elite and by cultivating the division the people vs. the corrupt and self-interested elites. As the parties were built around the personality of the leader, the party organization had to be built in a top-down manner (at least partially). Membership organizations were established or enhanced in a short period of time and the territorial coverage of the organization was very good in all three parties.

In spite of these similarities, there were important differences, which had an impact on the electoral fate of these political parties. On the one hand, the Bulgarian and Romanian populist parties emphasized leadership at the expense of building a long-lasting organization. In their case the political management related more to personal and ad hoc strategies of the leaders than to coordinated organizational strategy. They were more an appendage of their leaders than institutions of representation *per se*. In their case, the leadership filtered the strategies of mobilization without interest in a legal rational codification of the leadership. Their top-down political organization, with limited membership, hierarchical structures, and high levels of centralization, were only meant to comply with their leaders' efforts to attract electoral support. Neither the BBT nor the PPDD built organizations with the aim of developing them over time and making tools for representation, membership and candidate recruitment out of them. Instead, they served a short-term goal in assisting the leader in gaining electoral support and disintegrated soon thereafter. In a nutshell, their strong dependency on the party leader ensured a swift electoral breakthrough, but the absence of an organization impeded their survival in the long run.

On the other hand, the PSRM provided an alternative model in which the charismatic leader took responsibility for the electoral discourse alongside a developing party organization. In this sense, the personalization of power that characterized the other two parties was limited in this case and the leader did not have to (re)invent the party around him. Instead, he adapted his discourse and behavior to what already existed in the party; he also pushed the party's organization to adapt to the new realities and worked to boost membership and to establish new organizations. Stable electoral support can be obtained if territorial branches provide continuous support to the party. The rigorous approach towards membership and the relative power provided to territorial organizations – as opposed to the rigid hierarchical structure that characterized the other two parties – increased the likelihood that this organization would develop. The result was that the charismatic leadership increased the visibility of the PSRM and enabled it to achieve good electoral results for the first time in its history, while the solid party organizations helped maintain a certain level of popularity. Of the three parties, it is the only one that still has a strong chance of continuing in the parliamentary arena.

The implications of this study go beyond the comparison of the three parties and have relevance for research on populism more broadly. At a theoretical level, these results indicate the existence of endogenous sources that could influence the fate of populists in the political space. Their inability to develop stable organizations beyond the personality of their leaders may cost them their continuous presence in parliament despite occasional good results at the polls. Party organization could thus be an important explanation for the decline of populist actors. Furthermore, our analysis distinguished between two analytical units that are often mixed when defining populism: leaders and parties. While our findings indicate that some parties heavily depend on their members, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to treat the two separately. At an empirical level, the analysis revealed the existence of several patterns of organization development between populist parties. This adds nuance to earlier research, which pointed in the direction of a thin organization in the service of the party leader. While two of the parties investigated here followed that pattern, the third – which was more successful electorally – provides an alternative model that deserves further research in either an in-depth or a comparative perspective.

Further research could elaborate on an empirical result from this analysis that could not be discussed in detail: the thickness of ideology. Unlike the BBT and PPDD, the PSRM attached a thicker ideology to its organizational development. It could very well be that without a thick ideology the novelty effect of personalist leadership tends to fade over time. Ideology could therefore be an

alternative determinant for the variation in electoral performance across parties that deserves closer investigation.

Bibliography:

- Albertazzi, D. & McDonnell, D., 2008a. Introduction. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell, eds. *Twenty-First Century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–11.
- Albertazzi, D. & McDonnell, D. eds., 2008b. *Twenty-First Century Populism. The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Betz, H.-G., 2002. Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Contemporary Democracies. In Y. Mény & Y. Surel, eds. *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 197–213.
- Bos, L., van der Brug, W. & de Vreese, C.H., 2013. An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica*, 48(2), pp.192–208.
- van der Brug, W. & Mughan, A., 2007. Charisma, Leader Effects and Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties. *Party Politics*, 13(1), pp.29–51.
- Canovan, M., 1999. Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1), pp.2–16.
- Carter, E., 2005. *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Cross, W. & Pilet, J.-B. eds., 2016. *The Politics of Party Leadership: A Cross-National Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freeden, M., 1996. *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gherghina, S., 2014. *Party Organization and Electoral Volatility in Central and Eastern Europe: Enhancing Voter Loyalty*, London: Routledge.
- Gherghina, S. & Misoiu, S., 2014. A Rising Populist Star: The Emergence and Development of the PPDD in Romania. *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 22(2), pp.181–197.
- Gidron, N. & Bonikowski, B., 2013. Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda. *Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Working Paper Series, Harvard University*, (13-0004), pp.1–38.
- Ignazi, P., 2003. *Extreme right parties in Western Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johansson, K.M., 2014. How Populist Parties Organize. *PESO Research Report, School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University*, (2), pp.8–46.
- Kaltwasser, C.R., 2014. The Responses of Populism to Dahl's Democratic Dilemmas. *Political Studies*, 62(3), pp.470–487.
- Katz, R.S. & Mair, P., 1993. The Evolution of Party Organizations in Europe: The Three Faces of Party Organization. *The American Review of Politics*, 14, pp.593–617.
- Kriesi, H., 2014. The Populist Challenge. *West European Politics*, 37(2), pp.361–378.
- Lubbers, M., Gijsberts, M. & Scheepers, P., 2002. Extreme right-wing voting in Western Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 41(3), pp.345–378.
- Moffitt, B. & Tormey, S., 2014. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies*, 62(2), pp.381–397.
- Mudde, C., 2007. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, C., 2004. The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp.542–563.
- Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser, C.R., 2013. Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), pp.147–174.
- Norris, P., 2005. *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Pauwels, T., 2014. *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pirro, A., 2015. *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, Impact, and Electoral Performance*, London: Routledge.
- Poguntke, T., 2002. Party Organizational Linkage: Parties Without Firm Social Roots? In K. R. Luther & F. Muller-Rommel, eds. *Political Parties in the New Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 43–62.
- Rooduijn, M. & Pauwels, T., 2011. Measuring Populism: Comparing Two Methods of Content Analysis. *West European Politics*, 34(6), pp.1272–1283.
- Soare, S., 2014. Hit by Populism: Democracy in Ruins. *Southeastern Europe*, 38(1), pp.25–55.
- Stanley, B., 2008. The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1), pp.95–110.
- Taggart, P., 2000. *Populism*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Tavits, M., 2013. *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Werkmann, C. & Gherghina, S., 2018. Organized for Parliament? Explaining the Electoral Success of Radical Right Parties in Post-Communist Europe. *Government and Opposition*, 53(3), pp.461–485.
- Weyland, K., 2001. Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), pp.1–22.

Online sources

- BBT Party Statute. 2014. <http://bulgariabezczenzura.bg/>, last accessed 11 September 2015.
- e-democracy.md. 2011. Congresul X al Partidului Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova (The 10th Congress of the PSRM), www.e-democracy.md/parties/events/psmpr/congres-x-psrm/, last accessed 21 January 2016.
- Freedom House. 2014. freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/Bulgaria, last accessed 22 November 2015.
- Novinite. 2013. New Bulgarian Politician to Stage Human Blockade of President Office, www.novinite.com/articles/155705/New+Bulgarian+Politician+to+Stage+Human+Blockade+of+President+Office, last accessed 22 November 2015.
- Novinite. 2014a. Bulgaria Without Censorship Promises to Create 1M Jobs by 2022, www.novinite.com/articles/163745/Bulgaria+Without+Censorship+Promises+to+Create+1M+Jobs+by+2022#sthash.qppbyvyN.dpu, last accessed 22 November 2015.
- Novinite. 2014b. Nikolay Barekov Party's Deputy Chariman Quits, Slams Leader, www.novinite.com/articles/162114/Nikolay+Barekov+Party%27s+Deputy+Chariman+Quits%2C+Slams+Leader#sthash.OeGpP793.dpuf, last accessed 22 November 2015.
- PPDD Statute. 2012. available at <http://ppdd.ro>, last accessed 27 July 2013.
- PSRM Statute. 2013. Available at socialistii.md, last accessed 11 January 2016.
- Radio Free Europe. 2014. www.rferl.org/content/moldova-court-rejects-patria-appeal-ban/26713787.html, last accessed 22 November 2015.
- Website BBT. bulgariabezczenzura.bg/en/about-us/, last accessed 17 October 2015.
- Website PPDD, www.ppdd.ro, last accessed 27 July 2013.
- Website PSRM. socialistii.md, last accessed 11 April 2016.